

Book Review: Essentials of middle and secondary social studies

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Journell, W., & Gomez, M. (2014). [Review of the book *Essentials of middle and secondary social studies* by W. B. Russell, S. Waters, & T. N. Turner]. *Journal of Social Studies Research*, 38(4), 227-228.

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Abstract:

As former teachers, one secondary and one middle grades, who are now teacher educators, we understand the challenge of finding appropriate resources that provide preservice teachers with an encouraging, yet realistic, view of K-12 education. In *Essentials of Middle and Secondary Social Studies*, Russell, Waters, and Turner have written a text designed to supplement the development of preservice social studies teachers that would be an ideal companion to any middle or secondary methods course. In contrast to educational texts that rely heavily on abstract theories, *Essentials* combines theory with practical, research-based instructional strategies that preservice teachers can use in their classrooms. The book is also clearly written in a conversational style that methods students would find palatable.

Keywords: teacher educators | secondary and middle methods instructors | social studies

Article:

As former teachers, one secondary and one middle grades, who are now teacher educators, we understand the challenge of finding appropriate resources that provide preservice teachers with an encouraging, yet realistic, view of K-12 education. In *Essentials of Middle and Secondary Social Studies*, Russell, Waters, and Turner have written a text designed to supplement the development of preservice social studies teachers that would be an ideal companion to any middle or secondary methods course.¹ In contrast to educational texts that rely heavily on abstract theories, *Essentials* combines theory with practical, research-based instructional strategies that preservice teachers can use in their classrooms. The book is also clearly written in a conversational style that methods students would find palatable.

Over the course of 12 chapters, the authors cover a range of topics related to social studies education. The first two chapters broadly situate social studies teaching and learning within the larger context of public education in the United States, both in terms of the role of social studies as an academic discipline and the responsibilities of social studies teachers as professional educators within an era defined by standards and increased accountability. Starting with Chapters 3 and 4, the authors delve into practice, beginning with the fundamentals of instructional planning and assessment, respectively. The next seven chapters cover content-specific instructional strategies. Chapter 5 provides a timely discussion of the role of reading and writing in social studies, which provides a nice segue into the next chapter on teaching diverse learners in social studies classrooms. The authors cover critical thinking and cooperative learning in Chapters 7 and 8, respectively, and Chapter 9 provides an extensive review of the benefits of drama and role play in social studies classrooms. The next two chapters discuss strategies for facilitating issues-centered learning and democratic decision-making as part of the social studies curriculum and the role of technology and media, specifically film, as an accompaniment to social studies instruction. The final chapter provides readers with two detailed lesson plans for each social studies discipline.

As already noted, there is much to like about *Essentials* with respect to preparing preservice social studies teachers. In particular, we were impressed with the inclusion of lesson plans and instructional strategies for *all* social studies disciplines. Within the social studies literature, history and civics are often given preference over the “other” social studies disciplines (Avery, 2013, Miller and VanFossen, 2008 and Segall and Helfenbein, 2008), which is problematic for methods instructors who are charged with preparing preservice teachers for all types of social studies classrooms. In our state, for example, psychology falls under the umbrella of social studies, and we place many student teachers in psychology classrooms; yet, we often struggle to find texts that discuss best practices for K-12 psychology instruction. The inclusion of psychology strategies, along with strategies for the other often marginalized social studies disciplines of economics, geography, and sociology, separate *Essentials* from other texts on the market.

Another strength of this book is the emphasis the authors place on the importance of social studies in students' skill development. It has been our experience that many middle and secondary preservice teachers enter education programs because they are passionate about

¹ We would like to note that although Will Russell and Stewart Waters are editors for the *Journal of Social Studies Research*, they did not solicit this article, nor did they oversee the review process. The review and editing process of this article was handled by LaGarrett King, *JSSR* book review editor.

content, but they often lack an appreciation of the demands being placed on K-12 educators in the United States. The authors, for example, start Chapter 5, which is on the importance of reading and writing in social studies, with the phrase, “Every teacher is a reading teacher”. In today’s educational climate, especially in states that have adopted the Common Core, that statement is truer than ever before. Of similar importance to teaching social studies in this era of accountability are the chapters on assessment and evaluation, teaching critical thinking and problem solving, and managing diverse classrooms.

The chapters on content-specific strategies, namely drama and simulations, issues-centered learning, and technology and media, are well written and explained in depth. We both found the chapter on drama to be very useful in that it provided us with new information that we had not considered before. The chapters on issues-centered learning and technology, however, fell into our respective scholarly areas of interest, so we were a little more critical on what was omitted in these chapters. We felt that the issues-centered learning chapter needed to include more on the inevitable controversy that will occur when teachers ask their students to deliberate political issues in their classrooms. In particular, we felt that the question of whether teachers should disclose their own personal political beliefs, a common concern of social studies preservice teachers, was ignored, as was the work of scholars like Parker (2010) and Hess (2009) that describes the rationale for engaging students in controversial issue discussions.

Similarly, we found the discussion of technology integration into social studies instruction somewhat glossed over. Although the sections about technology use were very practical, such as a including guide for how to evaluate websites, we felt that preservice teachers would need a richer discussion on how to effectively incorporate the Internet and digital resources into their instruction. In other words, we did not feel that this chapter helped preservice teachers develop their technological pedagogical content knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) as well as it could have. Perhaps the reason for this shortcoming was that most of the chapter on technology and media was devoted to teaching with film. Although this section was well written and important to social studies instruction, it probably could have been given its own chapter, which may have allowed for a more detailed discussion on technology.

These critiques, however, are relatively minor compared to the overall potential this book offers social studies methods instructors. One valuable aspect of this book for teacher educators is that it does not have to be read in a linear fashion. The chapters stand well on their own, which means that methods professors could have the luxury of skipping around and using the text to supplement their instruction as they see fit. Even individual sections within chapters could be assigned on their own and, in most cases, students would be able to use those sections without having needed to read the sections that came before.

In fact, one of the only major concerns that we had after reading *Essentials* was the viability of the first two chapters. Although out of the authors’ control, Chapter 2 on contemporary social studies is already outdated in that the book was published before the release of the *C3 Framework* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) that is designed to serve as an accompaniment to the Common Core standards. Similarly, the laws related to teacher licensure and certification varies from state to state and are constantly changing, so we do not know how applicable those discussions will be in some contexts. We did, however, appreciate the inclusion

of professional organizations and journals related to social studies in the first chapter, and we would encourage anyone using this text in their methods course to assign those sections for their preservice teachers to read. Professional development should not stop once teachers leave their teacher education programs, and the authors make that point very well.

In short, we would recommend *Essentials* to both middle and secondary methods instructors. We believe the authors have effectively described realistic and practical strategies for successful social studies instruction that preservice teachers can use in their own classrooms. In a field where the only options for supplemental reading materials are often either dense research articles or superficial practitioner pieces, *Essentials* strikes a nice balance that preservice teachers should find both useful and approachable.

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